DYNAMITE®

SUGGESTED FOR MATURE READERS

Garth Ennis John McCrea Darick Robertson

The BOYS™

FIFTY-FOUR

WWW.DYNAMITE.NET

7 25130 16754 5

$3.99

DA RI CK 2011

Garth Ennis Darick Robertson

The BOYS™

FIFTY-FOUR

In a world where costumed heroes soar through the sky and masked vigilantes prowl the night, someone's got to make sure the "supes" don't get out of line. And someone will.

Billy Butcher, Wee Hughie, Mother's Milk, The Frenchman and The Female are The Boys: a CIA-backed team of very dangerous people, each one dedicated to the struggle against the most lethal force on Earth- superpower. Some superheroes have to be watched. Some have to be controlled. And some of them- sometimes- need to be taken out of the picture.

That's when you call in **The Boys**.

Story by:
GARTH ENNIS

Letters by:
SIMON BOWLAND

Pencils by:
JOHN McCREA with
KEITH BURNS

Colors by:
TONY AVIÑA

Inks by:
KEITH BURNS with
JOHN McCREA

Cover by:
DARICK ROBERTSON

The Boys Created By:
ENNIS & ROBERTSON

DYNAMITE® ENTERTAINMENT

FOR DYNAMTE ENTERTAINMENT

NICK BARRUCCI • PRESIDENT
JUAN COLLADO • CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER
JOSEPH RYBANDT • EDITOR
JOSH JOHNSON • CREATIVE DIRECTOR
RICH YOUNG • DIRECTOR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT
JASON ULLMEYER • SENIOR DESIGNER

COMIC SHOP LOCATOR SERVICE
888-COMIC-BOOK
comicshoplocator.com

THE BOYS, VOLUME 1 #54. First printing. Published by Dynamite Entertainment, 155 Ninth Avenue, Suite B, Runnemede, NJ 08078.

Copyright © 2011 Spitfire Productions Ltd. and Darick Robertson. All Rights Reserved. THE BOYS, all characters, the distinctive likenesses thereof and all related elements are trademarks of Spitfire Productions, Ltd. and Darick Robertson. Dynamite, Dynamite Entertainment & The Dynamite Entertainment logo ® 2011 DFI. All names, characters, events, and locales in this publication are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events or places, without satiric intent, is coincidental. No portion of this book may be reproduced by any means (digital or print) without the written permission of Dynamite Entertainment except for review purposes.

For information regarding press, media rights, foreign rights, licensing, promotions, and advertising e-mail: marketing@dynamite.net

Printed in Canada.

BRING YOUR GLASS.

I GOT HOME IN JULY OF 'FORTY-FIVE. FOR A WHILE IT LOOKED LIKE THE ARMY WOULD BE NEEDED IN THE EAST, BUT THEN THEY DROPPED THE A-BOMBS ON JAPAN AND THAT WAS THAT.

SO, NO WAR, NEW WORLD, AND I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT MY PLACE IS IN IT. AFTER THE BUSINESS IN THE WOODS I HAVE NO SENSE OF VICTORY WHATSOEVER; I FEEL LIKE THERE'S STILL UNFINISHED BUSINESS, SOME BATTLE OR OTHER I SHOULD GO AND FLING MYSELF INTO.

BUT NO WAR, LIKE I SAY. SO WHAT TO DO?

BY CHANCE I RUN INTO RICK BURNHAM, OLD FRIEND OF MINE FROM MY DARTMOUTH DAYS. I TELL HIM A LITTLE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED; TELL HIM NO ONE, NOT A SINGLE OFFICER I'VE SPOKEN TO SINCE THE P.O.W. CAMP, WANTS TO HEAR A SINGLE WORD ABOUT IT.

HE TELLS ME ABOUT SOME PEOPLE HE KNOWS IN WASHINGTON: HE'S GOING OUT THERE THE FOLLOWING WEEK, AND I SHOULD COME ALONG. THEY'RE LOOKING FOR GUYS LIKE US, HE SAYS, YOUNG AND HUNGRY, NOT DONE YET.

I SAY I'M NOT HUNGRY, RICK, ALL I AM IS ANGRY...

HE SAYS THAT'LL DO JUST FINE, AND THAT'S HOW I TAKE MY FIRST STEP TOWARDS JOINING THE C.I.A.

JINGS...

HERE, DO YOU OWN ALL THIS?

FAMILY'S RICH.

IN D.C. I MEET THESE FRIENDS OF RICK'S: ALL YOUNG OFFICERS OR EX-OFFICERS, ALL IVY LEAGUE BOYS FROM GOOD FAMILIES, AND ALL--ONE WAY OR ANOTHER--WITH THE SAME AXE TO GRIND.

AND ONE EXCEPTION: WILD BILL DONOVAN. EVER HEARD OF HIM?

UH...

"RAN THE OFFICE OF STRATEGIC SERVICES DURING THE WAR, PRETTY MUCH WHAT WOULD BECOME THE AGENCY IN PEACETIME. LARGER THAN LIFE CHARACTER; A COUPLE OF HUNDRED YEARS AGO HE WOULD HAVE BEEN A PIRATE.

"*WHEN IN EVIL COMPANY, TRY TO BLEND IN*--THAT WAS ONE OF HIS.

"NOW, I KNEW RICK WAS A MARINE, BUT UNTIL THEN I HADN'T KNOWN HE'D BEEN AT TARAWA. IT WAS AN ATOLL IN THE PACIFIC, WHERE THE HIGGINS BOATS GOT HUNG UP ON A REEF AND OUR GUYS HAD TO WADE THE REST OF THE WAY, STRAIGHT INTO THE JAP FIRE.

"RICK TALKED ABOUT AFTERWARDS, THE SAND BLACK-RED AND THE SURF JUST BLOODY FROTH, AND BODIES--SO MANY BODIES AND PARTS OF THEM, WALLOWING TOGETHER LIKE A GIANT RAFT, SHIFTING AND SHOVING UP LIMB AFTER LIMB...

"THIS ***MASS*** HAD BEEN HIS MEN, HE SAID, AND GRADUALLY I BEGAN TO SEE WHY WE WERE THERE."

ALL I COULD THINK, SIR, WAS...

JESUS, THIS HAD BETTER HAVE BEEN FOR *SOMETHING.*

GENTLEMEN.

THERE ARE AMERICAN BOYS LYING STREWN ACROSS BEACHES, OR FIELDS, OR THE BOTTOMS OF OCEANS, OR HANGING FROM BARBED WIRE, ALL OVER THIS ENTIRE PLANET. AND THEY DID NOT DIE SO THE OLD WAYS COULD CONTINUE.

THE BRITISH AND FRENCH AND DUTCH WILL NOT BE ALLOWED TO RESTORE THEIR EMPIRES, TO CARRY ON AS IF NOTHING HAS HAPPENED. WE WILL NOT ALLOW WHAT HAS BEEN FOUGHT FOR--*PAID FOR*-- TO SLIP THROUGH OUR FINGERS.

THE WORLD OWES US, GENTLEMEN:

AND BY GOD, WE ARE GOING TO COLLECT.

AN' YOU WENT FOR IT...?

IT HAD BEEN A LONG WAR, HUGHIE.

"WE STOOD ON OUR BEACHES, OR IN OUR CLEARINGS IN THE WOODS. WE KNELT IN THE BLOOD OF OUR BELOVED DEAD.

"WE REACHED OUT FOR SOMETHING TO MAKE IT RIGHT, AND NOT ONCE DID WE CONSIDER THAT WE WERE STARTING FROM THE WRONG PLACE.

"ALL WE COULD THINK WAS THAT THERE HAD TO BE SOME MEANING TO IT. THINGS LIKE THIS, THEY COULDN'T HAPPEN AND THE WORLD NOT EVEN BLINK.

"BUT DRESS IT UP HOWEVER WE MIGHT, AS DEBT COLLECTED TO BE PAID TOWARDS BETTER TIMES, AS PROTECTION FOR THE FUTURE AGAINST REPEAT AFFLICTIONS...

"THE MEANING WE HAD CHOSEN WAS REVENGE."

BARBARY COAST
part three

MORE?

AYE.

PLEASE.

SHE WAS A DOLL. SHE MADE YOU-- BELIEVE IN THINGS.

I KNOW WHICH ONE IT WAS DONE IT TO HER. AN' I'M GONNA FUCKIN' HAVE HIM FOR IT.

WHO...?

ONE OF THE BIG BOYS.

I THOUGHT... IT WASN'T SO MUCH THE WAR YOU BLAMED FOR WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR MEN...

QUITE RIGHT.

IT WAS V.A.C.. THEIR SUPES.

AFTER ALL, YOU CAN'T REALLY BLAME THE WAFFEN S.S. FOR DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY.

BUT A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE MORAL HIGH GROUND.

"YOU SEE, WHEN THE TIME CAME FOR ME TO TELL MY STORY...

"WELL, YOU CAN PROBABLY IMAGINE. IT'S NINETEEN FORTY-FIVE, AND I'M TALKING ABOUT FLYING MEN AND PEOPLE WHO LIFT TANKS, AND I'M SAYING THEY WERE ALL ON THE PAYROLL OF A MAJOR DEFENSE CONTRACTOR..."

NO ONE SNEERS AT ME. I'M NOT IMMEDIATELY UNDER SUSPICION, NOR AM I CAST OUT. BUT IT'S PRETTY CLEAR THAT I AM, IN MODERN PARLANCE, DECIDEDLY OFF-MESSAGE.

"WILLIAM DONOVAN WANTED A SINGLE AGENCY TO COORDINATE ALL SECRET INTELLIGENCE FOR THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT; TO ACT BOLDLY AND DECISIVELY IN EVERY CORNER OF THE GLOBE. THAT WAS THE GOAL. IT WAS GOING TO TAKE SOME DOING, AND DISTRACTIONS WERE EXTREMELY UNWELCOME.

"OUR NEW ENEMY HAD BEEN IDENTIFIED IN THE SHAPE OF SOVIET RUSSIA--INDEED, MANY SAID THAT WE HAD DISPENSED WITH THE GERMAN AND JAPANESE DISTRACTIONS AND WERE FINALLY GETTING DOWN TO THE MAIN EVENT. THE WHOLE WORLD WOULD BE OUR BATTLEFIELD. THE STAKES WERE UNIMAGINABLE."

AND SO... CONVINCING MYSELF THAT MY EXPERIENCE HAD BEEN A FREAK INCIDENT... I ALLOWED MYSELF TO BE SWEPT ALONG ON THE GREAT AMERICAN CRUSADE.

FREAK...?

NO ONE REPORTED HEARING OF ANYTHING REMOTELY LIKE IT. AGAIN: MEN WITH WINGS, STORYBOOK COSTUMES, SENATORIAL BACKING. I DID ALL THE RESEARCH I COULD AND CONCLUDED THAT V.A.C. HAD WISELY SCRAPPED THE PROJECT.

AND THERE WAS A PART OF ME, I MUST CONFESS, THAT WAS HAPPY TO FORGET IT. FOR THE MOMENT.

"THE STRANGE THING WAS THAT DONOVAN DIDN'T LAST. HE'D ALWAYS TREATED HARRY TRUMAN AS A HAYSEED--A MISTAKE A LOT OF PEOPLE MADE--AND J.EDGAR HOOVER DOWNRIGHT LOATHED HIM. INTELLIGENCE, AFTER ALL, WAS THE PRESERVE OF THE EVER-EXPANDING F.B.I.

"THERE WERE MUTTERINGS OF ***AMERICAN GESTAPO,*** AND WILD BILL WAS DISMISSED. BUT IN THE END IT DIDN'T REALLY MATTER."

"HIS SPIRIT REMAINED. THERE WERE ENOUGH OF US, HIS ACOLYTES, TO SEE THINGS THROUGH.

"WE BUILT THE SPY SERVICE HE'D WANTED AND WENT RIGHT TO WORK. THE IRON CURTAIN WAS A REALITY BY 'FORTY-SIX AND WE WERE READY FOR IT; WE DROPPED AGENTS ALL OVER RUSSIA AND EASTERN EUROPE, GAVE THEM WEAPONS AND TRANSMITTERS, TOLD THEM TO LIASE WITH LOCAL FREEDOM FIGHTERS AND ESTABLISH AN ESPIONAGE NETWORK THAT WOULD INFECT THE SOVIET UNION LIKE A VIRUS.

"EXCITING STUFF. HEADY TIMES. CLOAK AND DAGGER MERCHANTS ON THE GROUND, US BACK IN WASHINGTON DIRECTING OPERATIONS AS IF THEY WERE A FINELY-BALANCED GAME OF CHESS.

"AND THE RUSSIANS..."

THE RUSSIANS KILLED EVERY SINGLE MAN WE SENT.

WE DIDN'T FIND THIS OUT FOR MANY YEARS, BUT THEY'D BEEN WAITING FOR US. THEY HAD SPIES OF THEIR OWN IN THE WEST. IF THERE WERE ANY LOCAL FREEDOM FIGHTERS ACTUALLY WORTH TALKING ABOUT, THE GROUPS HAD ALREADY BEEN COMPLETELY INFILTRATED.

SO THEY SCOOPED UP OUR PEOPLE AND TORTURED THEM BEFORE THEY SHOT THEM, AND GOT THE RADIO CODES THEY NEEDED, AND SAID--PLENTY OF POTENTIAL HERE. SEND MORE PEOPLE. SEND MORE EQUIPMENT.

SEND MORE EVERYTHING, AND...CHRIST, WE DID.

OUR MISTAKE WAS THINKING A BUNCH OF CAN-DO ***BOY SCOUTS*** COULD TAKE ON ONE OF THE MOST SOPHISTICATED ESPIONAGE ORGANIZATIONS IN HISTORY.

IT DIDN'T MATTER THAT THE ENEMY WERE COMMUNISTS, BECAUSE FIRST AND FOREMOST THEY WERE RUSSIAN. SOVIET OR TSARIST, THEY HAD SEVERAL HUNDRED YEARS OF CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS EXPERIENCE TO DRAW ON.

WE DID NOT.

YEARS LATER I CHECKED THE RECORDS: OF FORTY-TWO O.S.S. AGENTS THAT BILL DONOVAN DROPPED INTO NAZI GERMANY, ONLY TWO WERE EVER HEARD FROM AGAIN.

AT THIS POINT I SHOULD TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT ***SPIES,*** AND ***TEAMS.***

AND ***SPECIAL FORCES.***

FIRST OF ALL, A SPY IS NOT AN IMPECCABLY-DRESSED ASSASSIN IN AN ASTON-MARTIN. HE'S GENERALLY A SEEDY LITTLE MAN YOU WOULDN'T LOOK AT TWICE. THE SAME QUITE OFTEN GOES FOR THE MAN WHO'S SENT TO KILL HIM.

HE'S ALSO BITTER, SPITEFUL, MALCONTENT. IF HIS LIFE HAD TURNED OUT THE WAY HE WANTED, HE'D HARDLY HAVE BECOME A TRAITOR IN THE FIRST PLACE, WOULD HE?

THEN AGAIN, HE GETS THE JOB DONE. BECAUSE NO ONE'S LOOKING AT HIM TWICE.

WHICH LEADS ME TO THE TEAM.

ANOTHER NOTION BELOVED AND MISCONSTRUED BY WRITERS OF FICTION. ODDBALL INDIVIDUALISTS BROUGHT TOGETHER FOR A COMMON PURPOSE--THE COOL-HEADED LEADER WHO SNAPS COMMANDS, THE MUSCLEMAN WITH A HAIR-TRIGGER TEMPER, THE FEMME FATALE--SOME MORE ***FATALE*** THAN OTHERS--

THE SCREWBALL, THE INNOCENT KID, THE LONER WITH A SECRET... THE ***SPECIALISTS,*** ACHIEVING MORE UNITED THAN THEY EVER COULD APART.

WHICH LEADS ME TO SPECIAL FORCES, AND IF THE VERY PHRASE DOESN'T MAKE THE HAIRS ON THE BACK OF YOUR NECK STAND UP, YOU HAVEN'T BEEN GOING TO THE MOVIES.

IT'S A POWERFUL CONCEPT. THERE'S NO DENYING THEY HAVE THEIR PLACE; YOU COULD ARGUE THAT THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE INSURGENCY IN PAKISTAN HAS SEEN THEM TRULY COME INTO THEIR OWN.

THE MYSTIQUE SURROUNDING COVERT MILITARY OPERATIVES HAS BEWITCHED SOME SURPRISING PEOPLE DOWN THE YEARS. MEN WHO SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER, LIKE CHURCHILL, KENNEDY...

YOU.

HMH.

THE REALITY IS THAT THEY DENUDE REGULAR FORMATIONS OF THEIR BEST, MOST MOTIVATED INDIVIDUALS. THEY COST A LOT TO TRAIN AND MAINTAIN FOR OFTEN LIMITED RETURNS.

AND THEY CAN FIND IT HARD TO JUSTIFY THE EXPENSE. SOMETIMES, TO DO SO, THEY CREATE THEIR OWN MISSIONS, BECOMING IN EFFECT PRIVATE ARMIES.

PAKISTAN AGAIN. WHERE, YOU MAY HAVE READ, CIVILIAN FATALITIES HAVE BECOME A SOURCE OF MUCH EMBARASSMENT TO U.S. MILITARY COMMANDERS: ALMOST AS MUCH AS THEIR OWN INABILITY TO REIN IN THE SEAL AND DELTA TEAMS RESPONSIBLE.

YOU THINK THE ***BOYS*** HAVE TURNED INTO THAT...?

SO DO YOU, ACCORDING TO M.M.

I JUST... WONDERED.

I MEAN I KEN WHAT A BLACK BUDGET IS, AN' I CAN'T IMAGINE THE CASH THAT PAYS FOR US IS ON THE BOOKS. WHICH MEANS IT'S-- WELL, IT'S--

OPEN TO ABUSE.

AYE, BUT I MEAN THERE IS-- THERE WAS--IS, WAS, I DUNNO, THERE IS A REAL MISSION HERE. THE SUPES ***NEED WATCHIN'***, THERE'S NO DENYIN' THAT.

OH, I KNOW. I KNEW THAT FROM THE BEGINNING.

"SEGUE OVER. THIS IS WHERE MY NARRATIVE--ALONG WITH THE MISSION I'D ASSIGNED MYSELF-- BOTH GET BACK ON TRACK."

DEAR GOD.

"THEY'D BEEN RENAMED, AND I COULD TELL FROM THE PICTURE THAT THEY WEREN'T THE SAME PEOPLE UNDER THE MASKS. THEY WERE BEING SOLD AS ANTI-CRIME WITH VAGUE--I.E. NON-EXISTENT--GOVERNMENT CREDENTIALS. THE WORD ***MILITARY*** WASN'T MENTIONED ONCE.

The Washington Post

Crimefighters Incorporated: Soldier Boy, The Steel Knight, Laddio, Eagle The Archer, ManBot, The Buzzer and the Crimson Countess meet the Press

"EVENTUALLY, OF COURSE, THESE PARTICULAR CLOWNS WOULD BECOME THE GROUP YOU KNEW AS PAYBACK. AFTER A FEW ADJUSTMENTS TO THE CAST, THE LINE-UP, AND IN TEK-KNIGHT'S CASE THE FRANCHISE, THEY'D BE GOOD TO GO. BUT IN NINETEEN-FIFTY THEY SEEMED ***BRAND, SPANKING NEW...***"

"UNLESS YOU'D BEEN AT A CERTAIN LOCATION IN THE ARDENNES SEVERAL YEARS BEFORE, IN WHICH CASE YOUR WORLD HAD JUST CAPSIZED."

HAVE YOU SEEN THE POST? HAVE YOU? THIS IS THE THING I WAS TRYING TO TELL YOU ABOUT IN--

GREG, WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?

I'M IN THE PARK, IT'S SATURDAY. LOOK--

ONE WAY

WELL GET YOUR ASS IN HERE RIGHT AWAY. SATURDAY'S CANCELLED.

WHAT?

NORTH KOREA JUST INVADED THE SOUTH. THERE'S A FUCKING COMMUNIST ARMY COMING ACROSS THE THIRTY-EIGHTH PARALLEL, AND IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE ANYTHING CAN STOP THEM.

YOU BETTER GET IN HERE NOW, PAL, BECAUSE WE'RE IN A SHOOTING WAR...

IF IT'S NOT ONE DAMN THING IT'S ANOTHER. OF COURSE, YOU COULD BE FORGIVEN FOR WONDERING WHY THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY DIDN'T SEE IT COMING, BUT THAT'S ANOTHER STORY...

YOU SAID NINETEEN-FIFTY, AYE? THAT'S WHEN THEY INTRODUCE THESE CRIMEFIGHTERS OR WHATEVER?

MM-HM.

WELL ISN'T THAT JUST THE YEAR BEFORE THE HOMELANDER'S BORN?

"CAUSE THE LEGEND TOLD ME THEY BROUGHT HIM OUT IN 'SIXTY-NINE, BUT HE'D REALLY BEEN STUCK IN A BUNKER WI' A NUKE FOR THE PAST EIGHTEEN YEARS. SO THAT WOULD MEAN HE WAS BORN IN 'FIFTY-ONE... SO...

"WHEN VOUGHT ANNOUNCED THESE OTHER GUYS, HE'D ALREADY'VE BEEN ON THE WAY..."

PAYBACK

VERY GOOD. IN FACT, JONAH VOGELBAUM HAD BEEN WORKING ON THE HOMELANDER FOR YEARS--AS YOU KNOW, HE WAS THE FIRST SUPE TO BE BORN AS SUCH, WITH THE OTHERS SIMPLY ORDINARY HUMAN BEINGS INJECTED WITH V AS ADULTS.

NOT A PATCH ON WHAT VOUGHT HOPED THEY'D HAVE EVENTUALLY, OF COURSE. BUT WHAT THE HELL, YOU'VE GOT THEM, SO WHY NOT USE THEM FOR SOMETHING?

BLAZE THE TRAIL. LAY THE GROUNDWORK FOR ***HIM,*** WHEN YOU'RE EVENTUALLY READY TO TELL THE WORLD.

I WATCHED THEM DO IT.

KOREA WAS ONE THING, BUT THE ***BIG WAR*** STAYED COLD. WE SETTLED IN FOR THE LONG HAUL. AND THROUGH ALL OF IT, CASTRO AND UNITED FRUIT AND ALL THE OTHER DISTRACTIONS, I KEPT ONE EYE ON V.A.C....

"THEY WERE RUNNING THE SAME MOVIE STAR ROUTINE THEY DO TODAY, AND THEY WERE SMART ABOUT IT: ANYONE MENTIONING SUPES IN DEFENSE WHEN THEY SAW THESE GUYS WOULD HAVE BEEN LAUGHED RIGHT OUT THE DOOR. A LESS SUSPICIOUS MAN THAN I AM MIGHT HAVE EVEN THOUGHT THEY'D LEARNED THEIR LESSON--AFTER ALL, WHO THE HELL WOULD WANT TO RISK ANOTHER MASSACRE?

"BUT I WATCHED THEM WORMING THEIR WAY INTO THE POPULAR CULTURE, WRAPPING THE FLAG AROUND THEM NICE AND TIGHT, AND ALL I COULD THINK WAS ***THIS IS GOING SOMEWHERE.***"

"Welcome home" to the King

Presley: "You guys got a lot of the same power E has"

THE IDEA BEING THAT I'D ONE DAY MARCH INTO MY BOSS'S OFFICE, AND PRESENT HIM WITH DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE OF THE GREATEST THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY SINCE THE CONFEDERACY. THEN I GOT A WAKE-UP CALL.

THE LEGEND TOLD YOU ABOUT THE IA DRANG?

AYE...

"I WAS IN SAIGON AT THE TIME, VISITING THE FIELD OFFICE THERE WITH RICK BURNHAM. RICK WAS SENIOR TO ME BY NOW, HAVING KEPT HIS MIND ON THE JOB A LITTLE MORE SUCCESSFULLY.

"WORD CAME IN THAT SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAD HAPPENED UP NORTH, AND WE GRABBED OUR SIDEARMS AND A COUPLE OF FLAKVESTS AND HOPPED THE VERY NEXT HUEY.

"IF I'M HONEST, WE HAD THE HARD-ONS THAT VETERANS SOMETIMES GET, WHENEVER THEY CATCH A WHIFF OF GUNSMOKE."

"AFTER ALL, IT HAD BEEN OVER TWENTY YEARS."

THIS IS A GODDAMN DISGRACE...

THE MAGAZINES ARE PRACTICALLY MADE FROM ALUMINUM FOIL, I DOUBT YOU COULD GET OFF FIVE ROUNDS WITHOUT THE FEED BUCKLING. I CAN'T BELIEVE WE SENT MEN INTO COMBAT WITH THIS PIECE OF GARBAGE.

MM.

V.A.C. HAVE GOT TO BE MADE TO PAY FOR THIS. HEADS ARE GOING TO ROLL.

MM.

SO TO SPEAK.

JESUS CHRIST, RICK, IS THAT SUPPOSED TO BE *FUNNY*--?

CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT THESE KIDS MUST HAVE GONE THROUGH? GETTING OVERRUN? WATCHING THE NOOSE TIGHTEN UNTIL THEY'RE BACK TO BACK, AND THEN IT'S RIFLE BUTTS AND FISTS AND FUCKING *TEETH?*

I DON'T HAVE TO IMAGINE IT. AS YOU VERY WELL KNOW.

SORRY. YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.

I JUST CAN'T SEE HOW THIS HAPPENED, HOW THESE MONEY-GRUBBING *PRICKS* WERE ALLOWED TO EQUIP AMERICAN SOLDIERS...

THEY WERE THE LOWEST BIDDER.

COME AGAIN?

AMERICAN CAPITALISM, GREG. YOU WANT TO PUT THE BRAKES ON THAT?

I MEAN WHAT, ARE YOU TURNING INTO SOME KIND OF SOCIALIST NOW...?

HA FUCKING HA.

I THOUGHT THE POINT OF YOU AND I ANSWERING THE CALL WAS TO STOP THESE THINGS FROM EVER HAPPENING AGAIN?

NO...THE POINT WAS THAT IF THEY WERE GOING TO HAPPEN, WE WERE GOING TO MAKE THEM MEAN SOMETHING.

AND WHAT THE HELL DOES *THIS* MEAN--?

THIS?

THIS IS THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS.

"THE POINT WAS TO ENGAGE SOVIET AND CHINESE COMMUNISM. THE POINT WAS WAR.

"THE DETAILS DIDN'T MATTER A DAMN."

BUT BOBBY KENNEDY WENT AFTER VOUGHT FOR THE RIFLES, HE BLOODY WELL CRUCIFIED THEM...

AND THEY CAME BACK THREE YEARS LATER WITH THE HOMELANDER, AND THAT'S WHEN I KNEW I'D BEEN RIGHT ALL ALONG.

IT WAS THE LEGEND WHO MADE THE NEXT MOVE.

"GOT HIMSELF FILMED AT A MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR THE AIR CAV. I KNEW NOTHING ABOUT COMIC BOOKS, BUT MY SECRETARY POINTED HIM OUT ON THE NEWS--"OH, THAT'S THAT FUNNY LITTLE MAN WHO RUNS VICTORY COMICS, MY BOYS LOVE HIM...

"I WAS CURIOUS. A VOUGHT MAN FEELING GUILTY FOR HIS COMPANY'S ACTIONS, THAT DIDN'T PLAY AT ALL--BUT A GLANCE AT THE RECORDS, AND THERE'S A LIEUTENANT IN BRAVO COMPANY SEEMS TO HAVE THE SAME NAME...SO..."

"OH CHRIST, AYE. HIS SON."

MM. THE FIRST ONE, NOT THAT BASTARD WHELP HE PRODUCED WITH MAEVE.

ANYHOW.

"THE LEGEND WAS HOPING SOMEONE WAS WATCHING, FIGURING VOUGHT'S LATEST PLAY HAD TO HAVE GOTTEN ***SOME*** OF THE RIGHT KIND OF ATTENTION. WE MET, AND IT WAS LIKE DISCOVERING A GOLDMINE: HE KNEW EVERYTHING.

"THE TRUTH ABOUT THE HOMELANDER'S ORIGINS, THE SUPPORT VOUGHT HAVE IN CONGRESS--THE SUPPORT THEIR OPPOSITION HAVE, TOO--AND EVEN VOGELBAUM, AND COMPOUND V.

"WHICH WAS WHERE I DECIDED TO MAKE A START..."

WI' VOGELBAUM? BUT HE KILLED HIMSELF...

NO, HE DIDN'T. THE LEGEND THINKS HE DID, ALONG WITH M.M. AND THE OTHER TWO.

THEN AGAIN, THEY ALSO THINK THE *V* THAT BUTCHER USED ON YOU WAS STOLEN BY ME FROM THE C.I.A.. INDUSTRIAL ESPIONAGE IS RARELY A TWO-WAY STREET.

I HAD TWO OBJECTIVES. ONE, BECAUSE THE AGENCY DIDN'T CARE ABOUT VOUGHT, I WAS ON MY OWN--THEREFORE, I HAD TO TURN THE SUPES AND THEIR OWNERS INTO AN ACTUAL ***VISIBLE*** THREAT.

TWO, I HAD TO BE ABLE TO NEUTRALIZE OR AT LEAST COMBAT THAT THREAT.

"IN PURSUING THESE OBJECTIVES, I WAS FINALLY ABLE TO UTILIZE THE SKILLS AND RESOURCES OF THE C.I.A. TO DO SOMETHING WORTHWHILE.

"FIRST, HAVING LEARNED VOGELBAUM'S LOCATION FROM THE LEGEND, I ANONYMOUSLY SENT THE DETAILS TO THE C.E.O.S OF BOEING, DOW, GENERAL DYNAMICS AND SEVERAL OTHER MAJOR VOUGHT COMPETITORS. THEN I WAITED FOR THEM TO CHECK THE INFORMATION AND ACT."

"THEN I FOLLOWED HIS ABDUCTORS TO THEIR INITIAL R.V. AND ELIMINATED THEM, PRIOR TO DOING THE SAME TO VOGELBAUM.

"HE'D CREATED STORMFRONT FOR THE NAZIS, THEN TURNED THE KID OVER TO V.A. AND STARTED A SUPE PROGRAM UP FOR THEM. IT WAS HIS CREATIONS THAT GOT MY BATTALION SLAUGHTERED. HE'D GIVEN US THE HOMELANDER, BLACK NOIR, THE WHOLE ARYAN DREAM MADE REAL, AND GOD ONLY KNEW WHAT HIS EXPERIMENTS WOULD ENABLE VOUGHT TO DO IN THE FUTURE..."

AND...WHEN IT CAME TO IT...I DIDN'T HAVE IT IN ME TO SHOOT A WHIMPERING LITTLE SEVENTY YEAR-OLD MAN.

"HE WAS THE CLASSIC SCATTERBRAINED ACADEMIC, HIDING IN HIS WORK FROM THE MEMORY OF HIS FAMILY'S MURDER. HIDING FROM THE REALITY OF WHERE HIS WORK WAS HEADED, COME TO THAT.

"HE PUT ME IN MIND OF OPPENHEIMER: REALIZING FAR TOO LATE EXACTLY WHAT IT WAS THAT HE'D ACHIEVED, BEGGING TRUMAN NOT TO USE IT."

AND KILLING HIM WOULDN'T STOP VOUGHT. EVEN IF THEY COULDN'T REPLICATE HIS WORK, THE ENTIRE LINE-UP OF THE SEVEN WAS ALREADY ESTABLISHED.

SO I DECIDED HE WOULD COME AND WORK FOR UNCLE SAM. OR ME, AT ANY RATE.

SO WHY DOES EVERYONE THINK HE SLASHED HIS WRISTS, THEN?

THERE ARE CERTAIN FREELANCERS THE AGENCY EMPLOYS TO PROVIDE CADAVERS--LOOKALIKES, ESSENTIALLY. IT HAPPENS OFF THE BOOKS WITH PAYMENTS IN CASH. NO ONE IN AUTHORITY WANTS TO KNOW.

A RECENTLY-DECEASED GERIATRIC MALE--RIGHT HEIGHT AND WEIGHT, BEATEN BEYOND RECOGNITION WHEN HE RESISTED HIS ABDUCTORS, RADIAL AND ULNAR ARTERIES OPEN--WAS NOT HARD TO LOCATE. SAID ABDUCTORS WERE NEVER FOUND; THEY OBVIOUSLY ABSCONDED WHEN THEY REALIZED THEY'D KILLED THE STAR PRIZE.

"I DECIDED TO GO TO BURNHAM. HE MIGHT NOT HAVE SEEN V.A. AS A THREAT, INITIALLY, BUT HE WAS A FIERCELY LOYAL COMPANY MAN--AND I HAD A FEELING HE WAS HEADED ALL THE WAY TO THE TOP. WHEN I TOLD HIM WHAT VOGELBAUM TOLD ME, HE REACTED EXACTLY LIKE I HOPED.

"HE WAS *LIVID* THAT VOUGHT HAD KEPT SUCH AN OBVIOUS NATIONAL SECURITY ASSET TO THEMSELVES. ***WHO DID VON BRAUN BELONG TO, NASA OR FUCKING MCDONNELL DOUGLAS,*** WAS HOW HE PUT IT.

"ALL OF A SUDDEN, SOMEONE WAS ON MY SIDE."

UP TO A POINT. I KNEW RICK'S FIRST INSTINCT WOULD BE TO START VOGELBAUM WORKING ON SUPES FOR US, UNDER OUR OWN PROGRAM--WHICH WAS EXACTLY WHAT I DIDN'T WANT.

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHO CONTROLS THE PURSE STRINGS, YOU CAN'T PUT A HUMAN BRAIN BEHIND POWER LIKE THAT AND EXPECT ANY GOOD TO COME OF IT...

"SO I BRIEFED THE OLD MAN MYSELF. VERY CAREFULLY, VERY PRECISELY. HE'D WOKEN UP TO THE DISASTROUS POTENTIAL OF WHAT HE'D CREATED; IT DIDN'T TAKE MUCH FOR HIM TO PLAY BALL.

"HIS WORK HAD TO BECOME PROHIBITIVELY EXPENSIVE--AND IT DID. IT HAD TO TAKE A LONG, LONG TIME TO BEAR FRUIT--NO PROBLEMS THERE. IT COULD NOT, ***EVER,*** RESULT IN ANYTHING ***LIKE*** A SUPERHUMAN THAT THE U.S. ARMY WOULD CONSIDER USING ON THE BATTLEFIELD...

"VOGELBAUM WAS THREE FOR THREE."

SO WHEN I EVENTUALLY DID PRESENT HIS MAGIC FORMULA TO RICK, SEVEN OR EIGHT YEARS LATER, IT WAS WHAT I'D ASKED FOR: A ONE-SHOT INJECTION OF V THAT INCREASED STRENGTH AND ENDURANCE BY A FACTOR OF ABOUT FIFTY. IT DIDN'T MAKE YOU FLY AND IT DIDN'T MAKE YOU BULLETPROOF.

JESUS, IT TOOK HIM LONG ENOUGH, SAYS RICK, HOW MUCH DID IT END UP COSTING? AND I TELL HIM, AND THAT'S WHEN HE HAS HIS FIRST HEART ATTACK.

"HE'D ORGANIZED A BUDGET AND LEFT ME TO DRAW ON IT AS I SAW FIT, AND I'D MADE THE MOST OF THE OPPORTUNITY. THESE WERE THE DAYS OF WINE AND ROSES; IRAN-CONTRA HAD YET TO COME ALONG TO SPOIL THE FUN.

"I WASN'T WORRIED ABOUT RICK. HE WAS TOUGH, HE WAS A SHREWD OPERATOR, AND HE ALWAYS MADE THE MOST OF A BAD SITUATION. I WAS COUNTING ON THAT ONE IN PARTICULAR FOR HIS RETURN."

YOU'RE NO' VERY SENTIMENTAL ABOUT EACH OTHER, ARE YOU...?

WE'RE THE GREATEST GENERATION, KID. WHISKEY AND IRON AND GUTS AND GLORY.

BESIDES, I WAS RIGHT. HE WAS BACK INSIDE A YEAR, AND TWO YEARS AFTER THAT HE WAS DIRECTOR OF THE AGENCY: BODIES BURIED AND SKELETONS SHUT AWAY.

I'D BEEN QUIET, LETTING HIM COOL DOWN. BUT I PICKED MY MOMENT AND MADE MY PITCH.

"WE'D NEVER HAVE OUR ARMY OF SUPES, WE JUST COULDN'T AFFORD IT--AND WE COULDN'T ANNOUNCE WHAT WE DID HAVE, EITHER, OR CONGRESS WOULD HANG, DRAW AND QUARTER US OVER WHAT WE'D SPENT. BUT WE ***COULD*** HAVE OPERATIVES TO ***OPPOSE*** SUPES, AND THE WAY THINGS WERE MOVING, WE WERE GOING TO NEED THEM.

"THIS WAS AROUND EIGHTY-FIVE, AND VOUGHT HAD ADDED THE G-MEN TO THE ROSTER. ALL MANNER OF OTHERS, TOO, THEY SHOWED NO SIGN OF SLOWING DOWN."

"I KNEW WHAT THEY WERE SELLING. SO DID RICK. AND WE KNEW IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THE WIND CHANGED, AND THEY BOUGHT THE VOTES THEY NEEDED ON THE HILL.

"SO MY PITCH WAS A TEAM. CREATED TO DO ONE JOB AND ONE JOB ONLY, AIMED LIKE A BULLET AT THE HEART OF THE VOUGHT-AMERICAN SUPERHUMAN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM. WE WOULD MANAGE, WE WOULD POLICE, WE WOULD LIQUIDATE WHEN NECESSARY.

"WE WOULD NEVER LET THEM GET COMFORTABLE ENOUGH TO BEGIN THE NEXT STAGE OF THEIR AGENDA."

"THE TINY RESERVE OF ONE-SHOT V THAT WE DID HAVE WOULD BE USED TO EMPOWER OUR OPERATIVES. FOR WHICH, OF COURSE, WE NEEDED A GUINEA PIG."

SOMEBODY HAD TO BE FIRST.

BUT...

DID YOU NO' SAY THAT TEAMS WEREN'T REALLY THE WAY TO GO? 'CAUSE OF ALL THE WAYS THEY CAN TURN OUT WRONG?

I DID.

I DID INDEED.

BUT HINDSIGHT'S ALWAYS TWENTY-TWENTY, ISN'T IT?

I STARTED LOOKING FOR LIKELY CANDIDATES, AND IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE I FIRST RAN ACROSS BUTCHER.

next: OUTSIDE IN THE COLD DISTANCE